

## I Read It from (Back) Cover to Cover: Reading Japanese Manga as Literate Activity

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You might think books are pretty typical, but in other parts of the world, a book can look totally different. In this article, Dorothy M. Stone analyzes the genre of Japanese graphic novels called manga. Read from right to left, manga has a growing number of readers in the West, who celebrate their love for it in all kinds of ways!

### Introduction

Have you ever opened a book upside down? How quickly did you flip it back over and find the place you left off? Pretty quickly, I bet. But imagine the book you're reading is backwards—literally; front is back, left is right, and suddenly what you're reading doesn't make sense. That's what it's like to read manga for the first time. While I'm a seasoned reader now (and often have to double-take at American comics instead), there was once a time when I didn't know what manga was or how to read it—and that might be you right now, too.

“Manga” is the name of Japanese graphic novels and comics. The word derives from two kanji characters, 漫 (*man*), which means “whimsical,” and 画 (*ga*), meaning “picture.” This form of art and writing dates back as early as the 12th century when stories were depicted on scrolls, but really started developing into the form we know around the 1700s (Matsutani). The subject of these stories could range from legends to lessons, or mundane events to magnificent tales. Manga is such a huge part of Japanese culture that it's used not only for entertainment, but also for education, business,

tourism, and other industries. Worldwide, manga is rapidly growing, with over 400,000 volumes sold each month in the U.S. alone (for comparison, the most popular series in Japan sells almost 200 million copies monthly)!

## What makes a manga?

Manga has a wide range of **genre conventions** that readers will recognize, though they may take some getting used to. While manga may be the Japanese equivalent to American comics, there are quite a few things that differentiate the two genres. Much like Western comics, manga combine a series of pictures and words that are meant to be read in a sequence. Because manga is printed for mass distribution, it is composed entirely in black and white. So, for instance, if a character has light hair, their hair might be left blank, whereas someone with darker hair might appear to

### Genre

From the ISU Writing Program, Genre means a kind of production that it is possible to identify by understanding the conventions or features that make that production recognizable.

have black hair because it is filled in. This can make it challenging to differentiate between characters, props, or backgrounds, which is why manga artists additionally use what are called screentones to shade things in. **Screentones** are a variety of gray shades and patterns that provide depth to the page, and can be used for things such as hair, shadows, clothing, and more.

Since comics are printed pieces, it's easy to see and read what's going on, but it may be harder to imagine the sounds. Luckily, manga has you covered! In manga, **onomatopoeia**, or words that describe sounds, are used to express movement and impacts (like “zoom” or “bang” in English), but also the things that we wouldn't usually hear anyway, like surprise, staring, and heartbeats. Sounds and movement can also be expressed in the drawings themselves through the use of lines, gestures, and more screentones.

Of course, sounds also come across in actual speech bubbles. Like in the comics you might be used to, manga is driven through dialogue, or the conversations that characters have with one another. These reveal plot, feelings, and motivations and lay everything out for the reader to understand, with additional side comments written in smaller font outside the bubble. It's easy to tell the tone each character is taking when they speak by looking at their facial expressions, or the shape of the speech bubble. While a full, round bubble indicates regular speaking, bubbles with dashed outlines usually mean whispers, and jagged ones show shock or yelling. The hard part, though, might be in following the conversation itself—try it for yourself (Figure 1).

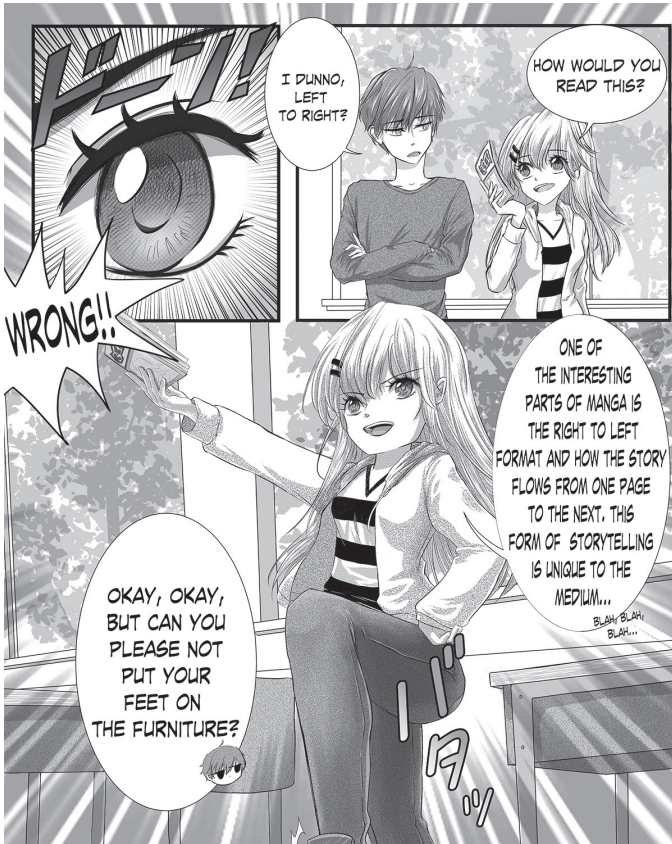


Figure 1: A typical conversation, illustrated by mintsie.wixsite.com/minstie.

Western comic readers like you or me might get confused at first when we’re reading speech bubbles and it sounds like the conversation is going backwards—that’s because it is! In Japan, text is read in columns, starting from the right side and moving toward the left (Figure 2). As a result, the orientation of the page itself is flipped. If it’s your first time, reading manga might take some getting used to, but once you get the hang of it, you’ll be able to follow along.

There was a time, however, when publishers would actually mirror the pages of a manga so that it conformed with Western writing conventions. While it might have been helpful for new readers, it sometimes damaged the original art because characters would appear differently, such as if they had writing on a t-shirt or a scar over their

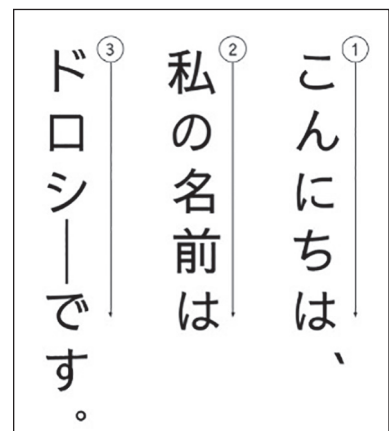


Figure 2: *Tategaki* reading direction.  
Translation: “Hello, my name is Dorothy.”

left eye rather than their right, or changing nuances that are plot-specific, like a right-handed character becoming left-handed. These days, though, manga is published in the original right-to-left format.

## Different Needs for Different Read(er)s

So while the orientation of the page remains based on Japanese language conventions, a lot of the content in manga is dictated by who the intended audience is. Whenever a new series debuts, it's already been tagged with a particular audience, each with its own expected **genre conventions**. Some common manga subgenres are *josei* and *seinen*, which are aimed at women and men, and *shōnen* and *shōjo*, which are aimed at younger boys and younger girls, respectively. For the sake of describing some of these differences, I'll be looking closely at the latter two, since those are the most mainstream (Table 1).

*Shōnen* manga series are typically action-driven and star a protagonist whose quest is to become strong or to save others (whether or not he wanted to in the first place). These types of stories often involve fantastical worlds or insert mystical elements into a real-world setting. Probably the first manga series I ever picked up, *Naruto*, is considered one of the most mainstream examples of a *shōnen* manga. Its titular protagonist is a class clown whose goal is to become the strongest ninja in his entire village. Over the course of 700 chapters (yes, I read them all), he masters difficult ninja techniques, defeats world-threatening powers, and proves his strength to everyone around him.

Table 1: Conventions of *shōnen* and *shōjo* manga at a glance.

<i>Shōnen</i> (Translation: “Boy”)	<i>Shōjo</i> (Translation: “Girl”)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Action</li> <li>• Main character goes from weak or unpopular to strong or famous</li> <li>• Fantasy setting</li> <li>• Characters are somewhat muscular</li> <li>• Dramatic shading and expressive gestures convey emotion</li> <li>• <i>Naruto</i> and <i>Inuyasha</i> are examples of series in this genre.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Romance</li> <li>• Plain, relatable main character</li> <li>• Realistic setting</li> <li>• Characters have large eyes and slim bodies</li> <li>• Lots of sparkly or flowery special effects and close-up shots</li> <li>• <i>Sukitte Ii na yo</i> and <i>Kamisama Kīss</i> are examples of this genre.</li> </ul>

*Shōjo*, on the other hand, are often romance stories that begin with a single, relatable heroine in a common setting, such as high school, who falls in love with someone very much her opposite. I could name a million different series with this premise, but one I remember being unreasonably obsessed with in high school was *Sukitte Ii na yo*, or *Say “I love you.”* In it, Mei Tachibana navigates high school as a loner, unwilling to make friends with the classmates she finds shallow. One day she kicks Yamato, the most popular guy in her grade, down the stairwell, and he instantly becomes interested in her atypical personality. Okay, reading that back, I’m getting a lot of secondhand embarrassment, but that’s what you sign up for if you read *shōjo*. Prepare for lots of super-saccharine love stories and even more tossing manga across the room.

In addition to the plots, the art for a *shōjo* manga series will also differ from that of a *shōnen*: the former will have characters with large eyes and skinny proportions, use lots of sparkly screen-tones and close-up shots, while the latter might have more muscular characters, darker lines, and more expressive gestures.

This isn’t to say that manga geared toward these audiences adhere strictly to these rules; like any other book, TV show, or movie we’re familiar with, though, these stories can overlap with other themes, such as comedy, horror, or fantasy, and looking through any collection will show you plenty of exceptions. The things I’ve listed are some conventions specific to certain manga subgenres, but despite all of it, audiences overlap much more than that. For instance, despite being a girl, I loved *Naruto* growing up, and that’s as standard of a *shōnen* as it gets!

## From the Drawing Board to Your Shelves

Now the whole publishing process for manga is a pretty complicated thing, so I won’t get into the nitty-gritty, but I do want to share a couple things about it that will help us understand its representation—the things that shape how authors plan a text or how readers take it up. Manga is usually serialized, or regularly published, in either a weekly or a monthly magazine. These magazines collect a number of new chapters from ongoing series, which is great for readers reading more than one title at a

### What is representation?

The ISU Writing website describes **representation** as one of its PCHAT terms (which are designed to help writers think about writing and genres as complex situations where people make many choices, rather than fixed or standardized texts that never change). The concept of representation connects to “issues related to the way that the people who produce a text conceptualize and plan it (how they think about it, how they talk about it), as well as all the activities and materials that help to shape how people do this” (ISUwriting.com)

time. The series that appear in each magazine differs depending on who the intended audience is. For *shōnen* series, chapters usually appear in weekly issues such as *Shōnen Jump*, and *shōjo* are published in monthly magazines like *LaLa*. Because *shōnen* series are published so often, they usually have shorter chapters, anywhere between fifteen and twenty pages. *Shōjo* series have a longer time frame between chapters, so their chapters are usually around thirty pages.

Once enough chapters are out (and “enough” depends on the length of the chapters), they are compiled into books called volumes, or *tankōbon* in Japanese. I should also mention that just like the order of the words on a page, the orientation of books and pages themselves are also right-to-left. This means that readers flip pages to the left, and the front cover is on what we Western readers would call the back! Once you’ve flipped the book around in your hands a couple times to get it right, you’ll see that the cover—unlike the contents—is a fully colored illustration, usually of a prominent character, with the series’ title and author. A quick flip through the volume will reveal the chapters you’ve already read if you’ve been keeping up with the serialization, but you might also discover new additions, like illustrations, author comments, or previews for the author’s other works. I love looking at these little extras because they’re usually pretty funny and a great way to start reading more things.

## Manga Takes New Forms: Remediating Manga into Different Modes

Now that the series has hooked a faithful reader like you, one that buys the volumes and eagerly awaits the next installment, I’m sure that its popularity is gonna blow up (thanks to you, trendsetter!) When it does, you can expect a multitude of adaptations to start coming out. As we’ve already talked about, manga is taken up most clearly through its visual and textual **modes** (those pictures and words). Sometimes, a popular manga will get a spin-off

manga that follows a new plot or character or puts existing ones in comedic situations. Other genres that the series gets adapted into might communicate in completely different ways.

### Multimodal Composing

*Multimodal Composing* specifically refers to ALL of the modes that humans can use to communicate that would include: Alphabetic (stuff we write using the alphabet), Visual (pictures), Aural (sound), Oral (spoken) and Symbolic (using symbols that aren’t alphabetic, like emoticons or emojis).

If you’re not one for pictures and just want the story, light novels would be an excellent choice for you. Like the name suggests, light novels are entirely text-based adaptations that make for easy reading. If you’re a fan of audiobooks and podcasts, maybe you’d also be a fan of drama CDs. The discs usually come bundled with the



purchase of a new volume of manga and contain acted voice recordings of the characters. Drama CDs follow the characters through a story independent from the main series, which are often seemingly mundane activities like going shopping or studying but with a bunch of crazy shenanigans to keep it entertaining. To make up for the missing visual aspect, these CDs incorporate conversations, inner monologues, background music, and various sound effects so that listeners can imagine the scene unfolding in front of them.

The most notable adaptation of manga is in the form of anime. The term **anime** derives from the English word “animation” and is used to describe the Japanese style of cartoons. If your manga series gets turned into an anime, you know you’ve made it—anime tends to reach a wider audience than just manga for the same reason your friend might watch the movie but not read the book it’s based on: the anime is a very casual watch, it’s not as long of a commitment, and you can just listen along instead of focusing on reading. Anime is also popular because it’s visually appealing: those black and white drawings have now become a fluid movement with animated expressions and vibrant colors. Lots of anime have a talented voice cast and powerful soundtracks that add drama and emotion to the scene that you can’t get from manga alone. However, one caveat of anime adaptations is that they are sometimes unfaithful to the source. The translation of a text from their paper form to the screen forces animators to add or cut out certain elements in order to fit the flow of the anime; since manga are mostly driven by the dialogue between characters, the anime has to find ways to stretch whole chapters into twenty-two minutes of animation while keeping audiences in suspense. This often results in scenes getting cut out, plots changing, and long-time fans being left disappointed. So if you weren’t satisfied with how the anime ended, there’s a chance that the manga will fix that.

## Manga and Fandom and Friends (Oh My!)

If the series left you with a ton of feelings, it’s perfectly okay to let it all out. People who enjoy manga and anime, like fans of any other media, form communities where they can talk about their favorite series and characters. Many manga hosting sites, and other platforms like Reddit, offer forums for comments, theories, sharing, and other fun topics. On social media, you might see people creating blogs or groups dedicated to certain series, roleplaying with one another, or producing fan content. Many creatives like artists



Figure 3: Lilith from the game *Borderlands*, cosplayed by IG@themisadventuresofjaz.

and writers get their starts producing fanart and fanfiction. While these works used to be housed on particular sites, such as DeviantArt or FanFiction.net, they're now getting posted to popular sites like Instagram and Twitter and receiving lots of casual engagement. And don't even get me started on the anime music videos—just type the letters “AMV” next to your favorite anime or manga series on YouTube and you'll see how huge the community is.

But people's love for manga transcends the online space. In many places across the world, fans come together at gatherings called conventions, or cons for short. Most conventions have dedicated spaces for meet and greets with industry professionals, panels and discussions, and singing karaoke to your favorite songs. It's extremely common to find people dressed as their favorite characters, whether they purchased a costume online or worked tirelessly for months sewing it from scratch like my friend Jaz (Figure 3). Cosplayers have the confidence to show off the things they love because they're surrounded by others who love the same thing.



Figure 4: Badges from FanimeCon, featuring art from IG@ZambiCandy.

My hometown hosts the largest anime convention in northern California (Figure 4). Every May, more than 30,000 manga, anime, and gaming enthusiasts gather to share their love of media and make new friends. I go with my cousin (who drew the earlier comic, by the way!) almost every year, and we spend whole days on our feet browsing merchandise and trying to find any trace of our favorite series, since the things we tend to like never get that popular. My favorite part of going to a convention is the chance to buy official and fan-made merchandise of the series I like, but this can sometimes be a

challenge when your tastes are as obscure as mine. One of my best memories from a convention is when my cousin and I spotted a person wearing a shirt from our favorite series, *Chihayafuru*, which is about teenagers playing a traditional Japanese card game (it's not as boring as it sounds, I promise!). We approached her and shyly complimented her shirt, and she started bursting with excitement, thrilled that we recognized it. She pulled some stickers she had made out of her wallet—mascots from that series—and gave them to us, and while she didn't have enough for both of us, we were happy to have found a fellow fan in a sea of literal thousands.

There's so much to see and so many experiences to be had at con. If any of the things I just talked about sound interesting to you, I highly recommend you attend one! Chicago has its own Anime Midwest convention every July, so these events are much closer than you think.



## Manga Culture in Japan

I've talked a lot about my experience as an American fan of manga, but I think it's also important to also talk about the concept of manga as a cross-cultural genre. Since Japan is where manga originated, it would be wise to understand the specific ways that Japanese people interact with the genre in their own contexts.

In Japan, it isn't rare at all to see someone reading manga on the subway. Whether it's a businessman going to work, a kid on their way home from school, or anyone else, you might look around and find people reading physical copies or on their phones and tablets (Rash). Walking by a bookstore, you might look through the window to find a bunch of people browsing through the latest issues and volumes. Others might go to manga cafes—places where one can sit, eat, and read manga—but overall, manga-reading is just another typical part of the culture.

As much as manga-reading is a casual act in Japan, though, it can also be pretty over-the-top! Imagine going to your favorite café or bakery for a snack, but you notice that there's a line out the door. You queue up and notice that everyone in front of you is chattering about this or that and finally, once you make it through the door, you're greeted by cosplayers, large cutouts of manga characters, and a special menu themed around a certain series. What are the chances? Well, this is a pretty common experience in Tokyo, and particularly in its Akihabara district. Akihabara is the manga fan's paradise: its streets are lined with manga bookstores, arcades, character cafes, and other brightly colored attractions. Another important event for manga-lovers in Japan is the twice-yearly Comiket, a convention for sharing self-published work that draws in more than half a million attendees every year.

## How Japanese Culture is Represented in Manga

As a product of Japan, manga tends to include cultural norms that are unfamiliar to Western readers. These can range from specific behaviors such as bowing one's head as a sign of respect, saying "itadakimasu" before eating, and washing off prior to dipping into the public bathhouse, to the peculiarly large presence of vending machines (it feels like they're on every corner, really!). Since I've been reading manga for so long now, a lot of these nuances go without much second thought from me, but they were certainly strange to me at first. However, all of these features have their roots somewhere, whether that be due to a lack of tubs in traditional homes, the need to save space while providing food, or simply an emphasis on showing respect to others.

I want to look more closely at another aspect of Japanese culture that shows up in manga, which are shrines and beings called **yōkai**. *Yōkai* is a hard word to translate into English because it can refer to monsters, spirits, or demons depending on the context, and I think you'll agree with me when I say those things are not the same. *Yōkai* are deeply rooted in folklore and Shintoism, a religion that honors nature and ancestry, and so these characters, who often resemble animals, tend to appear around shrines. The common occurrence of *yōkai* probably has to do with the representation of an author's experiences: Japanese manga tends to include cultural references that are part of how Japanese artists and creators understand the world, which in turn influences the kinds of stories they use and how they visualize those stories in manga. My early introduction to *yōkai* was in the *shōnen* series *Inuyasha*, which features a shrine maiden, or person that lives at and takes care of a shrine, who gets transported to feudal Japan and meets a half-dog-demon warrior. The series introduces readers to both good and evil *yōkai* and, although I wish I could forget the images of the evil ones, tells stories about each that make these beings seem almost human. *Inuyasha* started as a manga and spawned a long-running anime and multiple movies (and as of 2020, there's even a series about the next generation!); its popularity is a testament to the interest Japanese readers have in such supernatural occurrences. If you're into spirits, malicious or kind, other series like *Natsume's Book of Friends* and *Kamisama Kiss* are bound to teach you more. I still have much more to learn as a reader myself, and a great way to do so is to experience more.

## Blending Manga and American Comics

You can usually find manga in the "Teens" section of the library here in the U.S., but from what I've seen, the demographic of readers is broadening to include older adults and younger children. Maybe part of it is due to the fact that people who grew up with manga (like my cousin, who started reading when she was a freshman in high school) have started having their own children and sharing their interests with them. But while the culture surrounding manga is changing here, things are also changing in Japan.

As we've discussed, there are so many conventions of manga that make them uniquely Japanese. At the same time, there are also a lot of cross-cultural influences, which means that American comic books and superhero movies affect manga authors just as much. Take Kōhei Horikoshi, for example: Horikoshi is the author of the hit series, *My Hero Academia*. This series takes place in a world where 80% of humans are born with a quirk, or superpower. But because with great power comes great responsibility, many aspire to become heroes and save people from those who use their power for evil. To this end, students apply to high schools specifically meant to train

heroes. The main character, Deku, begins the series like any other boy his age with big dreams, but there's just one catch: he doesn't have a quirk. From the very beginning, you root for the underdog—something that is very common in Western comics. In fact, Horikoshi's favorite superhero, Spider-Man starts out very similarly to Deku: both are young and inexperienced but show their heroism through bravery, and although they do become heroes, they still face relatable, everyday problems that go hand-in-hand with being high school students. Both even find mentors in more experienced heroes, and in a serious nod to American comics, Horikoshi draws Deku's mentor All Might in the heavy-lined, hyper-muscular style that is trademark of Western heroes.

By fusing American culture into his work, Horikoshi demonstrates how genres like manga, something with such a long tradition in Japanese, are dynamic and evolve constantly with the introduction of new media. Aspects of different cultures, as we see here, go beyond national borders to inspire new art forms and create things that people of all different backgrounds can enjoy together.

## Become a Part of the Story

So now that you've been introduced to some manga, know how to read it, and seen all the ways you can enjoy it, you can keep the story going by sharing it with others or producing your own fan-media. Whether you choose to embrace this genre or leave it on the shelf, or any genre for that matter, it's important to know where it came from and what it means to others, culturally or otherwise. Learning these details, even as they appear in a book of comics, can help us appreciate one another's cultures and make us more responsive to the things taking place around us. Plus, giving a new piece of media a chance can only help when trying to avoid a boring situation. So, the next time you're taking the long train home for the weekend, consider bringing along some manga to make the journey a little more entertaining. (If you'd like some recommendations, all you have to do is ask!)

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